Civilisations
Revue internationale d'anthropologie et de sciences humaines

64 | 2015
Enquêter en terrains difficiles

“In dreams begin responsibilities”

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/civilisations/3879
DOI: 10.4000/civilisations.3879
ISSN: 2032-0442

Publisher
Institut de sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles

Printed version
Date of publication: 22 December 2015
Number of pages: 91-101
ISSN: 0009-8140

Electronic reference
Fiona Murphy, « “In dreams begin responsibilities” », *Civilisations* [Online], 64 | 2015, Online since 30 December 2018, connection on 03 January 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/civilisations/3879 ; DOI : 10.4000/civilisations.3879

"In dreams begin responsibilities"

The ethics of researching and writing trauma

Fiona MURPHY

Abstract: *On May 26th 1997, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) tabled one of the most shocking and painful reports that Australia had ever seen.* The Bringing Them Home report *(Wilson and Dodson, 1997) was the result of months of consultations right across the continent of Australia, and established that between the years of 1910 until the late 1970's between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families. This paper argues that an ethnographic exploration of trauma (while just one modality of understanding suffering) calls for a more involved and deliberate methodological approach. Key to this is understanding the question of how to represent, write, and articulate the difficulties of lives caught in the moral web of suffering. This article concludes with a focus on the issue of writing to do justice to these very lives arguing for a commitment to our research participant's anxieties and concerns with the anthropological writing project.*

Keywords: Aboriginal Australia, stolen generations, fieldwork, trauma, writing, ethics.

Résumé : *Le 26 mai 1997, la Commission australienne pour les droits de l'Homme et l'égalité des chances (HREOC) a déposé l'un des rapports les plus choquants et douloureux que l'Australie ait jamais vu. Le rapport* "Bringing Them Home" *(Wilson et Dodson, 1997) est le résultat de mois de consultations à travers le continent austral. Il démontre qu'entre 1910 et les années 1970, entre un dixième et un tiers des enfants aborigènes ont été séparés de force de leur famille. Le présent article soutient que l'analyse ethnographique des traumatismes (une des modalités de l'analyse compréhensive de la souffrance parmi d'autres) nécessite une approche méthodologique impliquée et réflexive. Il pose la question de la représentation, de l'écriture et de l'expression des difficultés de vivre sous l'emprise de la souffrance morale. L'article se concentre en conclusion sur la question de l'écriture qui rendra justice à ces vies : il plaide pour un engagement de l'écriture anthropologique dans les angoisses et préoccupations des participants à la recherche.*

Mots-clés : aborigènes d'Australie, générations volées, études de terrain, traumatisme, écriture, éthique.

Introduction

Confessing, re-telling, bearing witness to the story of Aboriginal Australian child removal, Peter moves through the streets of Redfern, one of Sydney's largest Aboriginal districts. He stops to speak to those who amble along – to those who tarry and have time to bear witness to this shared Australian-Aboriginal history. But he also dares to stop those who move with alacrity, scowling for they may miss their train or their bus. I, as ethnographer, walk with him one day, as he tells me that his rationale for confessing his 'total' self was inspired by religion. Born again now, he believes that a public confessing of all his past discretions is what is required of him to move forward but also to educate. He tells me as we walk that his testimony of suffering should be seen as a gift to those who hurt him, and to his family whom he had hurt. This wandering is healing and instructive; but he is berated, ignored, congratulated, and pitied as he moves through the streets. They come to make a documentary of him but some other members of the Stolen Generations dismiss him, it is this that hurts him most. But he continues to walk, his mission is to convey how damaging the experience of Aboriginal child removal has been, is and will continue to be, to bear witness to a past both misrecognised and misrepresented (Fieldnotes, 2004).

Walking the streets with Peter as he bore witness to the story of Australian Aboriginal child removal indicated the important nexus between bearing witness to a traumatic past and issues of legitimacy, representation and healing. I choose to open this piece with the story of Peter because it signals the dilemmas of storytelling in the face of a traumatic past. For the accompanying anthropologist, it marks out a terrain of representation wherein issues of voice, authorship, and ownership figure large. Peter, an Aboriginal man in his late sixties, removed from his family as a young boy, is a member of the group now commonly known as the "Stolen Generations." His life-story is one of many years of institutionalization, abuse and prison sentences. Born to an Aboriginal mother and white father, he was removed from his grandmother's home as a young child, spending most of his childhood in two institutions in New South Wales. Walking the streets telling his story to the general public was his way of seeking out personal healing.

Over the course of my doctoral field research in Australia, I heard many versions of the story of removal or "trauma portfolios" (James, 2004: 131) but Peter's attempt to become a "confessing self," yearning for recognition, legitimacy, healing and even reconciliation highlighted the perils of private and public attempts to bear witness to one's traumatic past. In this article, I examine the voices of Peter and other members of the Stolen Generations in order to illuminate the challenges of conducting and writing an ethnography of trauma. Inspired by the Irish poet W. B Yeat's collection "Responsibilities" wherein he posits that in dreams begin responsibilities, I set out the challenges of doing this kind of rewarding but emotionally fraught type of research. This is ultimately the type of work that demands an ethics of responsibility. Research with trauma survivors produces a kind of knowing that is not always wholly translatable in writing forms, thus challenging issues of voice, authorship and genre, indeed, representation writ large. Herein, I call for a consideration of how anthropology as a moral project in the context of studies of the "traumatic" can lead to social action. This call for an ethical-methodological position is even more urgent in the context of a

contemporary Australian Aboriginal Studies long encumbered by a complex political situation (see Cowlishaw, 2006). I conclude with a consideration of the implications of an anthropological writing confronted with trauma and suffering by voicing the need for an ethics of listening to be embedded in anthropological writing projects.

Background

After years of broader societal silence on the issue of Aboriginal child removal, a commission of inquiry was conducted across Australia. On May 26th 1997, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) tabled one of the most shocking and painful reports that Australia had ever seen. The *Bringing Them Home* (1997) report was the result of months of consultations right across the continent of Australia. It established that between the years of 1910 until the late 1970's between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families. The Commission listened to 535 stories of removal, abuse, loss, and continuing pain and trauma, and had access to nearly a thousand more in written form. Intense debate followed the tabling of the report about the nature of the removals, the policies and historical motivations of those involved in the removals, as well as the language deployed by the report to describe the widespread removal of mixed heritage Aboriginal children (as cultural genocide or ethnocide) (see Manne, 2001; Moses, 2004).The Stolen Generations and their stories of trauma and abuse became Whitlock claims "the cornerstone of the pursuit of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians" (Whitlock, 2001: 198).

The response from the general Australian public was also overwhelming with the *Bringing Them Home* report being one of the best-selling government publications in Australia. The report, subsequent debates, and its effectiveness in mobilizing a deep activism amongst both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populace form the cornerstone of this article. Coming to the field a number of years after the tabling of the report meant arriving into a heated political context radicalized through activism, campaigning, human rights, and reconciliation. I conducted fieldwork for a period of two years – mainly through an organization called the National Sorry Day Organisation. While I was mostly based in New South Wales, I also travelled to Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Australian Capital Territory, and Central Australia to interview and track a number of different memorial projects as well as attending various Stolen Generations events, commemorations, conferences, and reunions. My field-site therefore was one where reunions to the sites of former institutions, memorial projects, reparations campaigns, demands for an apology, and attempts to re-unite with culture, language and kin were all modalities of seeking legitimization and healing. Story-telling remained central to these attempts at healing but in the fraught space of traumatic memory and suffering, this was a storytelling made complex by the challenges of memory, ownership, and politics. It is this very "project" that my larger work on the politicization of trauma in the context of the removal of Aboriginal Australians seeks to track. Ultimately, in line with this special issue, it is fieldwork in a "difficult context," one troubled by memories of violence and suffering and a politics of resentment.

Researching Trauma: Methodological Reflections

The opening vignette to this article introduced some of the many complexities that researching the topic of trauma opened up. This space of trauma proved to be a fraught, complex, and emotional field site. Walking with Peter, a man whose life in its entirety was caught up in a moral web of suffering, engendered a cognisance of the difficulties of researching and writing trauma. The members of the Stolen Generations who became my research participants, the people who led me through the complex maze of suffering that composed their world, opened up the difficult question of obligation and responsibility as I listened to their stories. I, as anthropologist struggled, for alas, they offered me no escape (how could they), no Ariadne's thread so that I could emerge freely from the other side. I had taken up my position as field-researcher and as 'witness' and for my part, I found myself uncomfortably close to them in stories at the centre of a maze not of our making, a labyrinth of half-formed truths and admissions, of stories that struggled to recollect without providing adequate explanation or relief. I found myself in a position that would continue to be an emotional, moral, ethical, and intellectual challenge and one which opened up questions of not only the representation of suffering but (following Veena Das, 1990) of how anthropology could be responsive to suffering, and whether anthropological research and its findings should urge us to act in a constructive, collaborative, and conciliatory way.

Conducting this kind of research thus necessitates the development of a clear ethical sensibility in research design, collection, and writing. An ethnographic exploration of trauma, while just one modality of understanding suffering, demands a more involved and deliberate methodological approach. Spending large amounts of time in the field with members of the Stolen Generations was an emotional and intellectual challenge, it called for an "ethics of listening," a deeply attentive inhabiting of my chosen field-site. This brought with it a complex array of relationships; while the central focus was mostly on the experience of removal, I as researcher, got to know my research participant's joys, hopes and visions of happiness. We laughed together more times than I can remember. However, residing in this space where stories of suffering were so frequently circulated was also a numbing experience. There were and continue to be days where there were simply no words, no means of articulating the suffering that I encountered on the tearful faces of my research participants. Their experiences of abuse, violence, and everyday suffering were difficult research "objects," mostly alien and always frightening. Accessing such difficult experiences through the ethnographic encounter proved challenging, on some days, even dispiriting.

Geoffrey Hartman (1995: 544) tells us that in thinking about trauma, the task of its interpreter, "is always to sort out the relations between split or rupture, place of (first) encounter, repetition, and subject." The task, then, as I see it, of the interpreter-anthropologist is to engage with the layered complexity of traumatic experience, one that is anchored in personhood, memory, storytelling and place. But how is one to achieve this in practical (ethnographic) terms? Hartman is giving us in short "entry points" for an analysis of traumatic experience, and it is at these intersections that the ethnographer must be aware of the multi-contextual layered nature of trauma narratives. While the ethnographer is tasked with moving between these layers of traumatic experience, the issue of subjectivity and vulnerability is also of key importance. Researching suffering,

negotiating the stories of the suffering or traumatised requires an ethics of engagement, trust and connection between research participant and researcher. Such an engagement is undoubtedly one riddled with complexity-bringing to the fore issues such as research bias and subjectivity. As an ethnographer I had to access both individual and "communal" stories about the nature of Aboriginal child removal. The National Sorry Day Organisation and a number of smaller reconciliation groups facilitated this access. Other "entry points" to these trauma narratives included documenting the process of memorializing the story of the Stolen Generations, the campaign for a State apology and reparations, as well as the reconciliation movement more broadly.

Strathern (1991) has famously said that anthropological knowledge originates in the field encounter where we extend our partial connections to the world. I take then much of my inspiration in thinking through issues around researching trauma, of finding entry points in the ethnographic project to understanding traumatic experience, from dialogic anthropology. Anthropologists inspired by hermeneutics and phenomenology follow Gadamer's (2004) suggestion that where speakers are open to one another, where individuals do not talk across or past one another, where one follows rather than directs, ultimately a shared communicative world will be created. Hermeneutics as a method which privileges keeping meanings and possibilities in play alongside this potent notion of a shared communicative world informs much of my own ethnographic practice; it is an idea that signposts a world where the authority and control of the ethnographer is ruptured, and the voice of the respondents becomes primary (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973). It is ultimately, in this shared communicative world that we find our most revealing "entry point" into traumatic experience. As I walked with Peter around the streets of Redfern he mapped a shared space, relaying his story to me and the strangers along the way, creating thus a cartography of suffering that anchored his experience of removal in the hearts and minds of passer-bys. Peter puts it thus:

> *It's not difficult to tell my story because I tell everyone. That's the beauty about me telling everyone cos everyone is supposed to let their guts out and if you let your guts out, then you are set free. If you don't let your guts out then you'll walk around with a big baggage and all in your guts and you go blah blah blah 'Why can't I do this? and why can't I do that?' Because it's holding you back and that's the beauty of being able to let your guts out.* (Fieldnotes, 2005)

The value of an anthropology of trauma envisioned as a humanist sensibility embracing people in their own local worlds rests on being there, listening, negotiating, transcending and formulating. Walking with Peter as he "spilled his guts" allowed just this kind of field encounter and cultivated a moment of mutual understanding, which while important in all ethnographic practice, plays a significant role in field situations where an ethnographer is dealing with suffering. I was reminded frequently, however, during my fieldwork that I could never wholly understand the experience of Aboriginal child removal. My usual response was that while I was cognisant of this fact, my aim was more to bear witness, to tell and retell, and to understand as much as I could while always remembering that I could never walk in the shoes of a member of the Stolen Generations but only walk along-side them, for a little while at the very least.

The Ethnographer as Witness

> *You spent all this time gathering up our people's stories, our people's knowledge and now you are taking them back to Ireland with you, away from where they belong, to a place where they won't do any good for anyone.* (Fieldnotes 2005)

A few months before my return from the field, I bumped into an elderly Aboriginal woman called Jane with whom I had become very friendly with during my fieldwork. She was not a member of the Stolen Generations but had spent many years working as a political activist and educator. She asked me how my research was going and I told her that I was going home to Ireland soon. Unexpectedly, she launched a tirade, and spent about ten minutes condemning me for my decision to leave to write up my project. I was shocked, and a little bit upset, to the extent that I did not know how to respond, I felt like a thief, skulking away, bags' packed, leaving the country with stories of suffering, pain, and trauma. Her words were incisive, but I understood what she was talking about. In some ways, Jane's words were a warning and a challenge, a signal to act ethically and a call to action. She was pointing to the important conceptualisation of stories as gift, which like all gifts, compel recognition, acknowledgement, and instantiate an ethics of responsibility and equitable return. I hurriedly said my goodbyes and promised that she would be one of the first to have a copy of my thesis. She had given me a lot to think about, perhaps too much.

If we are to take Jane's concerns seriously, then the role too of the ethnographer as witness should be seen as deeply entangled with the ethnographic project, particularly with regards to an ethnography of trauma survivors. Jane's statements insist on a reflection on how an ethnography of trauma (as such) is co-produced by the anthropologist as witness and the trauma survivor. If, as ethnographers, our ethnographic research works best in the interstices of relationships, concepts, and worldviews, as such in the spaces in between or 'entry points', then we must take seriously our role as witnesses within the "murky politics of fieldwork" (Pels, 2000: 155) where calls to action or activism are often voiced by one's research participants. We must become as such then in our role as ethnographer-witness what Forsey (2010) calls "engaged listeners." Whether walking with Peter, the wandering confessor, through the streets of Sydney or discussing with Jane the vagaries of writing and representing Aboriginal histories, the ethnographer of traumatic experience must follow a middle way between engaged listening and a careful balanced witnessing that is both respectful of one's research participants and generative of a critical scholarly understanding of those very experiences.

Embedded in this discussion is of course a consideration of the ethics of conducting particular kinds of research. There is a voluminous amount written on the subject of ethics in research, particularly within anthropology. For the most part, I assume an ethical stance of "standing with" many of my research participants, while constructing a sense of anthropological research as a form of witness (Das, 2003). The ways in which anthropology as a moral project or form of witness can lead to social action has been widely interrogated (see Caplan, 2003; Farmer, 2004 and Schepher-Hughes, 1992) and critiqued (Fassin, 2011; Marcus, 2005). Critics of an anthropology characterized in this fashion claim that the notion of witness begets a position of disinterestedness (Marcus, 2005). It is also posited that such a methodological position is shot through with a kind of moralizing. While in agreement that the ethical stance of witness in any

project can be limited and limiting, I do not believe that witness implies passivity or is reminiscent of the colonial gaze. What it requires is what Pillow calls a "reflexivity of discomfort" (2003: 188), wherein reflexivity becomes a method of challenge, interruption, and interrogation, a rendering of self-knowledge as "uncomfortable and uncontainable" (2003: 188). Such practices enable a multiplicity of tellings and answers. It was this very point that my conversation with Jane evoked or the patterned cartography of Peter's walk brought us to. As a researcher listening, noting, and engaging with Aboriginal Australian stories of removal and suffering, I was, indeed am now, *implicated* as witness, as traveller through, and storyteller of the experience of Aboriginal child removal. Without such an understanding of these responsibilities as witness, ethnographer, and anthropologist, I would not be able to do justice to the wishes and experiences of my research participants, the requests "to tell our story with heart wherever you go" (Fieldnotes, 2004).

Dominick La Capra's (2001: 223) notion of "empathic unsettlement," a form of understanding which, "stylistically upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification, yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessary objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voices of the victims," is also key to my approach in constructing the ethnographer as witness. Standing with ones' research participants a la Capra avoids the cultivation of a form of biased subjectivity through a careful balance between witnessing, objectivity, empathy, understanding, and a call to action. What this sense of solidarity and call to action can accomplish also gets weighed against other ethical goods and considerations, such as scholarly devotion to objective representation, and the limits of human action in righting past wrongs. These ideas are at the heart of my methodological and theoretical approach in this article and throughout my broader ethnographic work. The anthropologist as witness then is an important conceptualization to espouse within the project of conducting an ethnography of trauma, it is a methodological "way of being" in the field that dares to venture more bravely into the depths of our research participants lives.

Writing Trauma

Writing an ethnography of trauma embracing the voices, concerns, and narratives of trauma survivors presents its own particular difficulties. Issues of representation and voice, objectivity and truth figure large when considering how to "write trauma." Thomas Eriksen (2006) tells us that the anthropologist should be the person who points out that the emperor is not wearing any clothes. Many of my research participants, especially Jane and Peter would agree. In the even more nuanced and restricted (and often politicised) world of suffering, this becomes an altogether more urgent task. Research and writing takes the form of witness, ultimately (especially in the context of my own writing), the form of a response. But in this dialogue between researcher and testifier/story teller, we are forced to confront the heavy pall of representation. While the crisis of representation is of an enduring nature within the discipline of anthropology, it is something which has become increasingly fraught for anthropologists doing research in difficult settings.

In the Australian context, the issue of representing suffering and trauma is problematic (particularly with Australian Aboriginal Studies), but there is also a pervading concern about who has the right to speak for whom, on what issue, where and when, and to whom? Concerns over what have been called, "the politics of visibility" are often played out in the most unsettling fashion between researchers and researched, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics (Grossman, 2003). This has been highlighted perhaps most contentiously in debates between academic scholars on the Northern Territory Intervention in Aboriginal communities (see Altman, 2013).

Many of my research participants questioned my motives for researching and writing about the issue of the Stolen Generations. While it was Jane who most strikingly articulated the right to write about Aboriginal suffering, others were also concerned with how I would represent their experiences, through which kinds of mediums and forums, and in what types of writing genres. Stories about how other members of the Stolen Generations had their stories misappropriated (in particular the story of Lowitja O Donoghue) were frequently told to me. In general then, I have attempted to write in a such way as to allow as much voice as possible, and to let the reader be guided by the Stolen Generations (see Murphy, 2011). It is, however, from Jackson's essay, "The Prose of Suffering," (2005) that I take most of my guidance for thinking through what an ethnography of trauma should look like. Speaking about the notion of witnessing and Adorno's famous essay on resignation, where he posits his belief that the critical thinker who does not allow himself to be forced into action is in fact the one who does not give in, Jackson meditates on the shape and form of ethnographic practice, a deliberation which is worth considering and quoting at length:

What it means not to give in is very much at the heart of ethnography. It means coexisting with the subject of one's concern, sustaining an engagement over time, in his or her place, on his or her terms, and trying not to escape into consoling intellectualisations, sympathetic identifications, or political actions that reduce the other to a means for advancing an academic career, or demonstrating what a compassionate person one is, or changing the world. It is a form of sustained communion (2005: 152).

Ethnography theorised as a form of sustained communion is an important place to begin and end with regards to my own research. An ethnography of trauma is not a place for political action, though it may provide a good starting point, it is not a place for lengthy and often disingenuous sympathetic identifications, nor is it the place to attempt to appear as a compassionate figure attempting to alter a wicked world. It is, however, a place where we try to do justice to the way others experience the world through a balance of engagement and witnessing. How we shape and articulate that experience should be, for all writers of ethnography, a key concern. For Jackson, the only way in which this might be possible is through what he calls a, *sustained intimate, and often silent, involvement in his or her everyday life-world that inevitably transforms one's own worldview, and may involve the other seeing his or her situation from a new perspective"* (2005: 153)*, recalling the notion of the "subjective in-between* (Jackson, 2002), where the ethnographic method allows, through a combination of dialogue and interpretation, an understanding of the other as oneself in different circumstances. Giving voice to these experiences, then, articulating the place of painful emotions in the quotidian is how an ethnography of suffering can forge a space of justice. It is just this method that we must employ in our writing of traumatic experience.

Jane (as well as some of my other research participants) requested a certain cautiousness in reminding me that through stories and their representation we can do violence to those we study and work with through our written expression. Anthropological theorisation can delegitimise and violate the experience of suffering even while we openly engage with the voices and stories of our research participants. Imposing "our" scholarly theories on real experiences and voices can attenuate the very experiences we wish to illuminate. So in order to avoid categorising suffering and those who suffer, we should ask, following Arthur Kleinman, "what is at stake for particular participants in particular situations?" (1995: 98). For Jane and Peter, what was at stake was the risk of mis-representation in an already charged political landscape where stories of Aboriginal suffering have sometimes been commodified and mis-appropriated. In particular for Peter, at stake was his attempt to become a kind of moral witness "re-enchanting a disenchanted world" (Frank, 1995: 185) with his courageous attempt to re-tell his experience of removal and institutionalization. One of the final conversations that I had with him before my departure focused on his growing despondency and frustration with the other men's reluctance to publicly share the intimate details of their lives. He had decided not to participate in their regular meetings any longer, or at least until they would start to speak with one another in a frank way about the abuse they had experienced. On a return visit to the field I tried to contact Peter, and was told by some of my other respondents that he was no longer welcome amongst them, "that religion had gone to his head," and that his inexorable indiscretions had become too much to bear for many of his friends. For Peter, his constant retelling, though liberating personally, had resulted in social isolation from the larger group of men who had spent time with him in the institution. Telling, or "confessing" as Peter saw it, proved too much for those who had to listen to his story repeatedly. Peter's alienation points to the idea that certain kinds of testimony, certain acts of storytelling seem only be acceptable at certain points in time. It also speaks to the fact that there are those who see healing in the telling of their stories, those who see more solace in silence, and those who are forced to speak when they would rather not.

There is a lesson here for us as researchers and writers of traumatic experience, or anthropologists more generally, storytelling (in particular of traumatic experience) in spite of the abundance of potentialities that it can generate also brings unanticipated harm. The "quicksand of meaningless" (Bracken, 2002: 2), which traumatic experience invokes, means traumatised subjects feel isolated, broken, and, "cast out of the divine systems of care and protection that sustains life" (Herman, 1997: 55). As ethnographers and writers of traumatic experience, we have a duty of care to our research participants, however challenging, we must through forms of sustained communion commit to an ongoing, engaged dialogue with them. Following Paul Stoller, we should endeavour to write an anthropology that "remains open to the world" (2014: 8). To do this we must understand, question, and engage the concerns and anxieties of our research participants around the anthropological writing project. Beyond the field, in our writing lives, we are charged with an honest commitment to both the representations of our research participant's experiences and scholarly critique. This is ultimately a very fine tight rope, one we must thread on carefully, in order to bring equilibrium to our representations of voice, story, traumatic experience, and emotion in such difficult fieldwork settings.

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